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For Immediate Release
November 1, 2005

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Sen. Hardiman's effort to honor Richard Austin heads to governor

LANSING – The state Treasury Building in Lansing would be named in honor of Richard Austin, a former Michigan secretary of state, under legislation sponsored by Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood.

The Michigan Senate sent Hardiman's Senate Bill 365 on Tuesday to the governor to consider. The senator's proposal would rename the building, located near the corner of Allegan and Walnut streets, which now houses the executive offices and the elections division of the Secretary of State's Office, among others. About half of the building's space is used by the Secretary of State's Office.

"Richard Austin was a unique public servant in our state's history," Hardiman said. "He was the longest serving Secretary of State. He was a gentleman and was always dedicated to the citizens of Michigan. The renaming of this building in his honor is a testament to his distinguished career."

Austin, who died in 2001 at the age of 87, represents a number of firsts for African Americans in Michigan. He was the first black secretary of state, serving from 1971 to 1994 as a Democrat, as well as being Michigan's first black major state officeholder. In 1941, he became the first black certified public accountant in Michigan.

Before becoming secretary of state, Austin served as Wayne County's auditor, and before that had been the first black candidate for mayor of Detroit. He also participated in Michigan's 1961 constitutional convention that drafted a new state constitution.

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